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## Sports Performance and Shaping International Image of a China:

### Towards Beijing 2008 Olympic Games<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** China is a country that has been using sport in order to reach political goals for many years. Lately such political exploitation of sport is directed at shaping the desirable international image of this country. This is done most of all through hosting sports events, but also through sports victories. The last aspect is the subject of this research. The aim of the article is therefore to investigate the issue of utilization of performance in international sport in order to enhance international image of a China. The research presented in the article is a case study concerning sport as a tool of nation-branding. Its main objective is to analyse motivation of China's decision-makers to use sports performance in order to enhance the country's international perception, and to observe how this goal is executed. The main hypothesis to be tested states that China perceives sports performance as an important tool of enhancing its international image.

**Keywords:** *China, Olympic Games, elite sport, sports diplomacy, nation-branding*

### Introduction

The international image of a country, or its competitive identity, is an issue that is gaining increasing attention of various stakeholders these days. Governments of subsequent states decide to take action in order to make their countries look better in the eyes of international publics, as they begin to understand how important it is to

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attract tourists, foreign investments, specialists, or to make the country more influential internationally, according to the concept of soft power introduced by Joseph Nye (2004). This raising engagement of decision-makers led to a greater interest in the issue by scholars as well. It is therefore important to investigate how the most sophisticated countries pursue their branding sports diplomacy, in order to assess it and determine good practices.

Shaping international image of a state can be pursued in many ways, for example by establishing cultural exchange, hosting events, using international media and internet, establishing cultural institutes etc. Sport can play an important role in this area, and hosting sports mega-events is often regarded as a key pillar that nation-branding and public diplomacy strategies are built on. Other channels of using sport for such sake include sports exchanges, sports development aid, performance in elite sport. The aim of this article is to investigate the issue of utilization of performance in international sport for the sake of enhancing international image of a state.

China is a very interesting example of a country that excessively uses sport in shaping its international perception, in order to counter negative stereotypes and create an image of a country that is cooperative, peace-loving, developing and ready to play a constructive role in international politics (van Ham, 2010). In order to achieve these goals, its government employs a whole range of tools, including sport. Hosting sports events appear to be one of the most important means. By organizing Olympics in Beijing in 2008, Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010 and the future Winter Olympics in Beijing in 2022, China's government attempts to achieve many of its branding goals. The state of art on the issue is impressive. Guoqi Xu (2008) in his book *Olympic Dreams* conducted a deep analysis of the growing China's interest in sport, which reached its top during the 2008 Olympic Games. The issue of hosting sports events in order to brand China was also investigated by Ingrid d'Hooghe (2015) in her book on general public diplomacy of China, considering not only issues related to sport. A number of articles in the themed issue of *The International Journal of the History of Sport* in 2010 is also worth mentioning, many of which assessed the branding effectiveness of Beijing 2008.

Since China's attempts to gain international prestige through sports victories was executed most of all during the Summer Olympic in Beijing in 2008, literature on this issue proved to be very useful in conducting the research. Works of Victor Cha including the book *Beyond the Final Score* (2009) are particularly valuable. *Beijing 2008: Preparing for Glory. Chinese Challenge in the 'Chinese Century'* edited by J.A. Mangan, D. Jinxia (2009) with chapters on attitudes concerning Beijing 2008 in various states was also useful in understanding this complex issue. Generally, though literature on China's sports performance tend to focus on the development of elite

sport system rather than on its influence on China's international brand. Similarly, the issue of using sports wins in shaping its international image remains neglected.

## **Methodology and hypothesis**

The research presented in the article is a case study concerning the use of sports victories in order to shape international image of a state, as the example of China - a country that appears to be very advanced and experienced in political and diplomatic utilization of sport. The main objective was therefore to investigate the motivation of China's decision-makers to use sports performance in order to enhance the country's international perception, and to observe how this goal was executed. Investigation included an analysis of the shape and evolution of the elite sport system in China, which is believed to be the main tool of acquiring sports dominance. The research has also encompassed analysis of Chinese sports achievements, particularly concerning the Olympic Games – a sports event that was given extraordinary priority in Chinese policy. The research has also included outline of the most contemporary trends in Chinese elite sports policy. The investigation has been conducted with the use of constructivist approach.

The hypothesis to be tested in the article states that China perceives sports performance as an important tool of enhancing its international image. Generally, sport has been playing an important role in branding China. In the past it allowed to bring other states closer, for instance through famous Ping Pong diplomacy. In those times the main motto of Chinese sports diplomacy stated “friendship first, competition second”. Such attitude has changed later though. These days China attempts to host many sports mega-events which are aimed to showcase the country in a desirable way. Even though organizing sports events appear to be the main way of shaping China's brand through sport, sports performance is important as well – according to the assumption that sport is a soft power resource, thus capable of affecting state's international image.

## **Outline of Chinese sports policy**

China's attempts to exploit good performance in sport in order to shape its positive international image are associated with the increasing interest in the concept of soft power in this country since the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century – among political elites, within academic discourse and public debate (Jiang, 2015). Still, such utilization of sport in China is nothing new. For example, when in 1959 table tennis player Rong Guotuan became the first ever world champion from China, Mao Zedong described

sport as a “spiritual nuclear weapon” (Wang, 2012, p. 149), while victories and domination of female volleyball team which won Olympic gold in Los Angeles was used to regain national pride after the Cultural Revolution. However, this had most of all an internal character, whereas the external political utilization of sport began to be exercised later.

The PRC returned to the international sport in 1984 during the Olympics in Los Angeles. Earlier the country’s athletes did not compete in the Olympic Games and majority of other competitions, as a result of its conflict with Taiwan. Participation in the Olympics gave China an opportunity to emphasize its independence from Moscow, and to send a message about its desire to join the elite of international sport (Whitby, 1999). The return to the Olympics was very successful for China as it won 15 gold medals and was 4<sup>th</sup> in the Olympic medal table. Of course the Olympics in Los Angeles were boycotted by the Soviet bloc, but China’s results were regarded as a success and a symbolic sign of its struggle to become a world superpower (Tan & Green, 2008). At the time, sports victories were recognized in China as a tool that allowed to gain international recognition and support (Jiang, 2015). What is more, Chinese managed to achieve good results during the Asian Games in Seoul in 1986 as well, where they managed to win 94 medals (Yu & Mangan, 2009). Mid 1980s was therefore the time, when Chinese understood the possibilities of shaping desirable international image through good results in sports.

In response to successful performance of Chinese athletes at the sports events in the mid-1980s Chinese decision-makers saw sport as the most obvious way of shaping the image of new, powerful China. Already in 1984 the government issued a Notice on Further Developing Sport and Physical Education, and turning China into a sports power within the 20<sup>th</sup> Century became the key goal. One year later the National Sports Committee prepared an Olympic Strategy, another document that was to foster realization of this objective. At the same time Central Government was supporting a growing number of sports financially, in order to win as many medals as possible. 13 sports were financed in 1980, three more since 1984 and another two since 1989 (Jinxia & Mangan, 2009).

Olympic victories were becoming the new Chinese obsession, but the next two Olympic Summer Games were disappointing. During the Games in Seoul in 1988 Chinese athletes won only 5 gold, 11 silver and 12 bronze medals. Olympics in Barcelona showed a good progress as the PRC won 16 gold, 22 silver and 16 bronze medals, but such result did not reflect new Chinese ambitions of gaining international prestige through sport (Whitby, 1999).

It is important to clarify how Chinese leadership was trying to achieve its goals concerning sports excellence, that was further aimed to enhance the state’s image.

Creating an effective elite sport system appeared to be the answer. Generally, elite sport system in China was being created since 1950s when Soviet solutions were implemented. As a result of excessive cooperation with the USSR the Ministry of Sport issued a document *The Competitive Sports System of the PRC* in 1956, in which 43 competitive sports were defined (Wei et al., 2011). The so called “whole nation mechanism” that was implemented at the time in most aspects remains unchanged until now (Li et al, 2009; Dennis & Grix, 2012).

Chinese elite sport lost some of its significance at the times of Cultural Revolution, but since 1970s sport began to be perceived as an important diplomatic tool and once again received heavy investments (Wei et al., 2011). This was more evident since late 1970s and the initiation of reforms in China. Still, the true development of the elite sport system and the strongest orientation on winning Olympic medals could be observed since 1990s, when state support for non-Olympic and team sports was reduced, while greatest attention was assigned to sports with chances of winning Olympic medals (Jinxia & Mangan, 2009). Such specialization allowed China to reach the third position at the Olympics in Sydney 2000 and second in Athens 2004 (Miller, 2009). Since 1994, owing to establishment of sports lottery, elite sport was provided good funding, which then led to further development of the system (Wei et al, 2011). It must also be noted that at the time the Olympic Games were actually the only sports event that mattered to Chinese authorities, similarly to the situation of European communist states during the Cold War.

Contemporary elite sport in China is managed by General Administration of Sport, while quasi-autonomous sports organizations – specialist national sport management centres – are responsible for managing up to three sports (Tan & Bairner, 2011). The whole structure is quite complex, but it generally remains under the government’s control (Gu et al, 2015), thus the whole system is sometimes called Politics-centred Whole Nation Sports System (Luo & Xue, 2013). It is worth noting, that even though China’s sport system is oriented most of all on elite sport, sport for all has also been developed – also as a way of selecting talented athletes. Investment in sport for all encompass mostly development of sports infrastructure (Tan, 2015). Still, China as the most populated country in the world is not as strongly dependent on talent selection as smaller nations. Nevertheless, elite sport remains the most important for Chinese policy-makers.

A changing approach to elite sport in China could be observed at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Traditionally Chinese have mostly invested in sports that allow to win many medals and with relatively low level of opponents. Apparently these days the country seeks new opportunities of winning Olympic medals, at the same time trying to explore medal chances in sports with global popularity (Zheng & Chen, 2016). In

the past such sports were often neglected because of very strong competition. Chinese elite sport system has traditionally been focusing on table tennis, badminton, water diving, weightlifting, gymnastics, and women's wrestling, rowing, canoes, volleyball, football, softball, basketball, hockey. Nowadays Chinese are also interested in development in such globally popular sports as beach volleyball or beach soccer (Tan & Green, 2008). Such reorientation of priorities appears to be a good idea considering the use of sport for the sake of shaping international image. The sports China has been traditionally strong at can often be described as niche. They may bring the glory during the Olympics, but popular sports may bring China publicity almost all the time, not just once every four years.

## **Beijing 2008**

China's attempts to use sports victories in order to foster its international image reached its peak during the Olympic Summer Games in Beijing in 2008. Winning medals by Chinese athletes was a part of validating the identity China sought to portray during the Games (Cha, 2010). It was important in order to make the whole story that the Games were telling both to the foreign publics and to the Chinese more plausible. This was related for instance to countering the image of the sick man of Asia. What is more, China's sports results were improving throughout the years before the Beijing Olympics, particularly since 2000. As has been noted, China managed to be second in the medal table during the Olympics in Athens, while victory in this ranking during the Games on Chinese soil was meant to represent the crowning of this remarkable progress (Cha, 2010). In this context Chinese newspapers often cited a statement by professor of sports psychology Mao Zhixiong, who said that "if you win a lot of medals, then it shows you have advanced as a country. It means the economy is growing, that living standards are improving and that there is a better technology" (Wardęga, 2014, p. 63). This supposition perfectly illustrates the mechanism, according to which Olympic medals were to shape the international image of a China.

During Beijing 2008 Olympics China's goal was not only to be first in the medal table. It was equally important to win against the United States, both concerning the amount of medal, but also in the direct duels. Such Chinese attitude was stemming from American engagement against Beijing's unsuccessful bid to host the Olympic Games in 2000. What is more, once China's capital city was elected to host the Olympics in 2008, many calls to boycott the event were coming from the USA (deLisle, 2008). Apart from such motivations, winning over the United States was to be symbolic as it was believed to be the greatest superpower in the world, both

politically and economically. Could there be a better way to show oneself as a great power than winning against the United States at the Summer Olympics?

Bearing in mind such Chinese motivation concerning the sports performance at the Olympics in 2008, athletic preparations were strongly intensified since Beijing was elected to host this event. In 2001 State General Sport Administration issued Project 119, in which 119 gold medal chances were identified (later this number was increased to 122). Chinese preparations were therefore focused on winning in those competitions (Brady, 2012). In 2002 Plan to Win the Glory in the 2008 Olympics was drafted by State Sports Administration, in order to further ensure success. According to the new document, Chinese athletes were to win 180 medals, 80 percent of which were to be won by women (Jinxia & Mangan, 2009). New legal acts were supporting and intensifying the earlier undertakings. What is more, enormous sums of money were spent on Olympic preparations. According to official information of Chinese Ministry of Sport, between 2001 and 2004 central government was spending 122 million USD annually for this sake, whereas between 2005 and 2008 this sum was doubled, and those calculations did not accommodate additional means of financing. In total Chinese athletic preparations to the Olympics are estimated to have cost 4,88 billion USD (Hong, 2008).

China managed to achieve its goals as its national team won in 51 gold medals during the Olympics in Beijing, thus winning the standard Olympic medal table. If the overall number of medals is considered, China was second to the United States. Unfortunately, various controversies appeared, for example concerning participation of too young athletes. There were accusations that some of the women gymnasts could have been 12 years old, while the minimum age to compete in the Olympics in gymnastics is 16 (Cha, 2010). Claims about doping were also voiced, but despite such minor criticism Chinese Olympic victory was undisputed.

China's leading position in the Olympic medal table was subject to various researches that investigated its reasons. Many authors share the believe that the Olympic medal table is in fact a weak measure of sports success, as smaller nations cannot hope for a top position. In his research Lewis Halsey (2009), apart from the Olympic results, took into consideration population and GDP as the key factors of sports success. According to him China did achieve better results than it was expected, what was stemming from the fact that it hosted the event and from the excessive investments in elite sport in the preceding years. Still, from the perspective of shaping international image of a state it is irrelevant that China did not perform better than its resources predestined it. It was the most important that Chinese athletes won so many medals, outnumbering the USA in the amount of gold ones.

## Discussion

Even though this research is aimed to analyse the role of sport in shaping the external image of a country, it should be emphasized that similarly as hosting the Beijing Olympics, winning it was also important internally, in reference to the Chinese people. Sports victories were providing people with the sense of national dignity, rejecting the previous image of the sick man of Asia (Cha, 2009). To make this message even more clear, when Chinese media published the Olympic medal table, column with the total number of medals won by respective countries was removed – as the United States were better than China in this aspect (Wardęga, 2014). Such, minor manipulation of the results might resemble Soviet-style propaganda, although obviously it was not as radical as in the USSR in the early years of the Cold War.

It remains debatable whether it was more important for the Chinese leadership win in the Beijing Olympics in order to improve the self-image and national pride of its people, or to impress the world. It is obvious that the Communist Party of China uses sport in order to maintain national unity and appreciation for the merits of the country's political system. Still, taking into consideration the research goals, it is irrelevant what was the primary motivation of investing in elite sport in China. What matters is that sports victories may affect the way the country is perceived by the foreign publics, for example by enhancing its publicity.

Apart from showcasing China as a world superpower, its branding goals concerning sports performance in Beijing also concerned countering the international perception that the country was nationalistic, even though this might appear at odds with perceiving athletic wins as a source of prestige. As a result, there were attempts to avoid attaching too much importance to particular sports victories of Chinese athletes. For instance, in the context of Sino-Japanese relations Chinese media were advised to promote friendship and proximity between the nations, accordingly with the official policy of leaving the history behind and focusing on future of the bilateral relations (Finlay & Xin, 2011). Generally Chinese media outlets were focusing on the international friendship and cooperation, contrary to for example American media that focused on Sino-American sports rivalry. For example, *The People's Daily* wrote in one of the articles that “People of different nationalities, ethnic origins and cultural backgrounds have come together under the Olympic flag for fellowship, showcasing the friendship between people from all parts of the world, and the “one world, one dream” shared by all” (Rosner et al, 2010, p. 139), at the same time evoking the slogan of the Games. This implies that the branding role of the Olympic victory was meant to be mostly statistical. This appears to have been very smart as it allowed to foster such branding objectives of the Olympics, as showing China as a peaceful,

cooperative, non-nationalistic country, but at the same time the results were speaking for themselves, showing that China was a great power.

After winning the Beijing 2008 Olympics, China's policy-makers decided that development of the elite sports system (called *Juguo Tizhi* which means that the whole nation supports elite sport system) shall be continued (Wei et al, 2011). During the subsequent Summer Olympics in London in 2012 China ranked second after the United States, winning 88 medals including 38 gold ones (BBC Sport, 2012). Four years later in Rio de Janeiro China was ranked third in the medal table, winning one gold medal less than Great Britain. In total Chinese athletes won in Rio 70 medals including 26 gold ones (BBC Sport, 2016). It is however difficult to tell whether such worse results unequivocally meant a decline of Chinese sports performance. It is estimated that countries hosting Summer Olympics usually lose 10 percent of all their medals during the next event, including 15 percent of the gold ones (Goldman Sachs, 2016). Of course this explains worse results of Chinese national team. Improving performance of Great Britain is at odds with those calculations, but it is stemming from a system change of elite sport that was conducted in Britain since late 1990s.

Current developments reveal a new approach of Chinese policy-makers concerning elite sport. Chinese football clubs are able to channel enormous sums of money for the salaries of footballers, thus attracting global football stars. As Arsenal FC manager Arsene Wenger stated, "China looks to have the financial power to move the whole league of Europe to China" (p. 212), in response to several transfers from European teams in 2016 (Rofe, 2016). The issue was back in agenda during in the 2017 Winter transfer window. Chinese football clubs that were spending great sums on transfers from foreign leagues have been receiving an indirect support from Chinese government - the companies who own the 16 clubs in the Chinese Super League see investment as a way to gain favour with the government (Price, 2017). It is believed, that Chinese leader since 2013 Xi Jinping is a football enthusiast (Rofe, 2016). However, early in 2017 Chinese government criticized 'irrational' expenditure of Chinese football clubs and claimed it would 'regulate and restrain high-priced signings, and make reasonable restrictions on players' high incomes' (AS, 2017). It remains uncertain what would be the further developments. Still, it is believed that high level of sports leagues may bring benefits for the country's brand, as in cases of the United States or Great Britain. This may also be seen as a development of earlier sports policy concepts of Chinese authorities, giving higher priority to more globally recognizable sports. Football is by far the most popular sport worldwide, so it may be assumed that enhancing its level may bring branding benefits as well. Together with lesser attention paid to dominance in the Olympic Games may suggest at least partial resignation from the Olympic medal table obsession.

It is beyond doubts that China has advanced the level of its elite sport within previous decades. After being ranked 11 at the Olympics in Seoul in 1988, China finished 4<sup>th</sup> in Barcelona and Atlanta, 3<sup>rd</sup> in Sydney, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Athens and eventually 1<sup>st</sup> in Beijing (Miller, 2012). A strong advancement of the level of Chinese football league – as a result of an intentional policy, may also be observed. This development should be associated most of all with the long-term elite sports policy. Generally, sport is believed to be one of the soft power resources (Ociepka, 2013), and therefore should be useable for the sake of nation-branding. Still, it is difficult to assess to what extent sport victories managed to enhance the international image of China. The reason for this is that there is a number of factors of state's competitive identity. If the Olympics in Beijing are considered, the fact that China was the host of the event is probably much more important to the country's image than the sports victory, not mentioning non-sports factors of the brand of a nation. As a matter of fact, China has climbed several spots in Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brand Index after Beijing Olympics, and was ranked 22 out of 50 in 2009 (GfK Roper, 2009). In contrast, in 2007 China was ranked 23 out of 38 countries (Anholt, 2007), thus suggesting positive influence of Beijing 2008 Olympics on China's nation-brand. It is highly probable that high level of Chinese sport has contributed to that advancement. It must be borne in mind that a sports win, particularly at the Olympics, enhances the state's publicity in the global media, as the winners are always presented with their national affiliation. It remains unclear though what is the extent of this influence. Either way, it is rather clear that elite sport is aimed to serve the purpose of branding China, but it appears to play a complementary role, with hosting sports events as the pillar of Chinese branding policy.

It appears that China will keep using sports performance in order to enhance its international perception. Country's leaders have also initiated commercialization of sport, in order to acquire additional funds (*China's sports policy...*, 2012). Still, the trend of China becoming dominant in international sport was stopped. Obviously China remained in the worlds athletic top, but it did not manage to secure its leading position for good. Branding effects of this situation may be twofold. Sports dominance contributes to presenting China as a global superpower, but on the other hand even a temporary step back may help China to counter the image of a non-democratic regime that would do anything to be first in the Olympic medal table. Being second or third still puts China as a world's power, but at the same time presents the country to foreign audience as a more 'normal' state, what fits in with one of China's branding goals – to obtain international respect and normal membership in the global community.

## Conclusions

Even though Chinese traditions of exploiting sport for diplomatic and political reasons are very rich, the country's leaders began to search for sports dominance in 1980s, as a result of unexpectedly good results of Chinese athletes at major sports events. At the time China's leaders understood that sports victories may play an important political role and set out an objective that the country would achieve the top level in international sport. This was to be reached through development of elite sport system, although its foundations were set already in 1950s as a result of cooperation with the Soviet Union.

As a result of greater emphasis on elite sport, China began to improve its results at subsequent Olympic Summer Games. However, the event in China's capital city in 2008 was the most important. Chinese leadership set a clear target – to win the Olympic medal table, at the same time outnumbering the United States which were the world's greatest sports power. China managed to reach this goal and even though its results during subsequent Olympics in 2012 and 2016 were worse, it still develops its elite sport, at the same time beginning to focus on sports that are more globally recognizable.

China's attempts to reach top level in sport is aimed to shape the country's image as a world's power, both among the people of China and the international publics. This was very clear during the Olympics in Beijing in 2008, where victory in the Olympic medal table was meant to be a mean of strengthening general message that the event was meant to send to foreign publics, that China is a superpower. What is more, these days China begins to seek for sports dominance in globally popular sport, thus achieving additional publicity. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that China perceives sports performance as an important tool of enhancing its international image appears highly probable.

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